

The Oregonian

Dumping fines help restore habitat

A settlement fund begins underwriting environmental projects along or near the Columbia River

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Hundreds of acres of wildlife habitat on the Columbia River and nearby coasts will be restored and protected with \$1.2 million paid by shipping companies caught dumping waste oil.

A court-ordered settlement last year created the Columbia River Estuarine Coastal Fund -- one of the largest community service payments made for conservation and environmental restoration in the Northwest. Federal prosecutors and the National Wildlife Foundation, overseeing the fund, announced the first round of grants Friday.

The 14 winning projects will benefit ocean, coastal and Columbia River natural resources and communities most affected by the illegal dumping. Awards range from \$5,000 to \$160,000. Matching funds from recipients bring the total spending to \$4.5 million.

The Columbia Land Trust in Vancouver received two grants totaling \$240,000 to help buy 155 acres of riparian habitat along Germany Creek near Cathlamet, Wash., and 105 acres of former floodplain habitat along the Wallooskee River south of Astoria. The Land Trust is providing about \$900,000 more to cover the costs of the land purchase. The property will be permanently protected as habitat for salmon, cutthroat trout, migratory birds, elk and eagles.

With a \$5,000 grant, the Lower Columbia River Watershed Council will create an educational program so 200 students can learn about the science of rivers and water-quality monitoring, growing native plants and restoring streamside environments.

The first round of money comes from three polluters: MMS Co. Ltd., a Japanese corporation and owner of the Spring Drake; Hoegh Fleet Services of Norway, owner of the Hoegh Minerva; and Marmaras Navigation Ltd., the Greek operator of the Agia Eirini. Federal prosecutors charged all three with violating pollution laws last year. Inspectors boarded the three ships and found evidence waste oil was intentionally dumped.

In addition to fines, and in some cases prison sentences for crew members, the legal settlements included payments to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for conservation and restoration projects in the damaged areas.

Since then, two more shipping companies caught polluting have added \$745,000 to the Columbia River Estuarine Coastal Fund this year. The foundation will solicit proposals for conservation projects this summer and is developing a similar fund for Puget Sound.

Karin Immergut, the U.S. attorney for Oregon who initiated work on the Columbia River fund, said it is likely to remain a source of support for habitat restoration as long as companies and individuals continue to break environmental laws.

"There's no guarantee -- our hope is that they will stop polluting," Immergut said. "But to the extent that we continue to find aggravated polluters, we're going to try to get money in those cases to do restoration and environment projects to help the community."

Nearly 100 proposals vied for grants -- competition that surprised foundation officials.

"I think it indicates that there is a huge need out there for this work to get done," said Krystyna Wolniakowski, director of the foundation's Northwest division in Portland.

The 14 winners were chosen by two independent committees: one composed of federal and state wildlife officials and another an array of nonprofit organizations, federal agencies, and representatives of Columbia Basin tribes with treaty rights to salmon and other natural resources.

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